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ABSTRACT

For many teachers and theorists of composition, the ingrained reluctance to use "I" came to stand as a powerful symbol of all that was alienating and disenfranchising about an institutionalized educational system that seemed more concerned with student discipline than empowerment. Consequently, the cultivation of the use of "I" as part of the effort to help students discover an authentic voice became an important movement within the progressive composition tradition. The prohibition against the use of "I" along with the related reluctance to include "opinion" in a paper have special resonance for working-class students. Constructing a working-class academic "I" is not a process of adapting to a given academic environment but of challenging that environment, a challenge inherent in the contradictions implied by the title "working-class academic." The constructing of the working-class academic "I" is more than just an issue of personal identity or of finding an individual's own true voice for both students and instructors: it represents a challenge to the very structures and culture of academic life itself. (CR)

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"Constructing an 'I' for Class: Working-Class Identity, Academic Discourse, and the Writer's 'I'"

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J. Alberti

TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)

The first-person personal pronoun has acquired an almost totemic significance in writing instruction for both teachers and students. To this day, the question from students of whether it is acceptable to use the word "I" in formal and even informal college writing remains one of the most common I hear as a writing instructor, even or especially when I ask students to write about personal experiences (one of the other most frequently-heard questions is, of course, whether papers should feature the student's opinions, but I'll return to that issue in a moment).

For many teachers and theorists of composition, particularly during the resurgence of composition studies in the late sixties and early seventies, this ingrained reluctance to use "I," the result of years of red pen marks in English classes, came to stand as a powerful symbol of all that was alienating and disenfranchising about an institutionalized educational system that seemed more concerned with student discipline than empowerment. Consequently, the cultivation of the use of "I" as part of the effort to help students discover an

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authentic voice became an important movement within the progressive composition tradition.

In a post-modern age, however, it has become impossible to embrace the concept of the authentic voice without having to deal with the criticism that such a concept is too invested in a kind of Romantic essentialism, a belief in an inner core of self-identity that may be deeply repressed by assembly-line models of teaching but that in the end is always finally available for recovery and restoration. Now, it is very true that some post-structuralist critiques of essentialism and identity can dissolve into a kind of philosophical game-playing that ultimately leads to political inertia (what's the point of looking if there's nothing to find) or even a kind of romantic individualism of its own, with writers and speakers thinking they can freely create whatever identities they please regardless of larger social realities (which are, of course, themselves constructions).

There are, I believe, progressive aspects to the post-structuralist critique of identity, aspects that can have particular importance tor working-class students. For one thing, abandoning the search for an essential self may come as a relief to those students--and those former students who become teachers--who never seem to find that self. For students and teachers whose collegiate experiences are marked by the need to cross borders of identity and discourse, a more flexible, socially-constructed understanding of identity can provide strategies for, say, navigating in a middle-class world as a working-class person without the constant sense that your every academic success as defined by

institutional standards means that you are somehow betraying your "real identity." In my paper I want to discuss some of my thinking about class identity and writing in college as a means of posing some questions for us to consider as writing teachers in working with students trying to construct a workable sense of themselves as working-class writers in a middle-class world, a challenge many of us continue to face on a daily basis in our professional lives.

I should emphasize at this point that in focusing on class identity, I am not taking into specific account the equally important questions of how academic discourse can be marginalizing for students on the bases of ethnicity, race, and gender, although a consideration of the intersection among these powerful issues of identity formation would be crucial in a more complete analysis of class identity in the academy.

As I mentioned above, the prohibition against the use of "I" along with the related reluctance to include "opinion" in a paper have special resonance for working-class students. First, the frequency with which these questions arise in the classroom suggest that these fears are not just common to but are in fact definitive of academic writing for many working-class students. In fact, it may be that the higher the class status of a writing student, the less likely it is for that student to be concerned with these issues at all. An obsession with correctness, with "not talking ignorant," as some of my students put it, is the mark of those outside of cultural privilege looking in. For these students, academic writing is precisely writing that excludes the personal in all forms. We now have various names for this fantasy of "writing degree zero," a writing without discernible

identity, bias, or point-of-view, and although I think you would find few actual teachers of writing who endorse such a concept, the fact remains that this is the dominant conception among working-class students about what academic writing should be, whatever the discipline and despite whatever subtle qualifications about the inescapability of perspective or point-of-view may have accompanied the injunction against the use of "I."

What are the relevant class implications of this equation of the academic with the depersonalized? The most obvious, perhaps, is that the ideal of "objectivity" in writing (which is often how this issue is framed pedagogically) really means striving for the voice of the middle-class professional, a task that will come more easily to students who were themselves raised by middle-class professionals. Along with this middle-class orientation is the long-standing association and denigration of the "personal" or local with lower social status, whether relating to gender, class, race, or ethnicity.

Add to this equation the fact that many if not in fact most traditional-age working-class college students, particularly students from suburban backgrounds, have themselves yet to come to a consciousness or identification of themselves as working-class when they enter college, and we come to the first set challenges we face as teachers of writing in dealing with how to construct a working-class "I" in the classroom:

•How do we legitimate the insights contained in the recognition among students that academic writing is supposed to be impersonal in order to critique the class implications of that so-called "impersonality"?

•At the same time that we critique the middle-class voice of academic "impersonality," what is our responsibility to working-class students to help them master that voice as a means to academic survival?

•How do we use writing to help students construct a working-class consciousness and identity that will in all probability put those students at odds with the dominant discourse they are also potentially trying to imitate?

These challenges can be further boiled down to a split in the construction of writing pedagogies for working-class students. On the one hand, there are strategies for fostering a working-class identity in these students, an identity critical of the middle-class assumptions of academic writing; on the other, there are strategies not for challenging but for adapting and even assimilating to this alienating academic discourse. Both challenges meet in the powerful symbol of the pronoun "I," but they often pull in opposite directions.

For example, I teach a class called Advanced College Writing that serves as the second part of our general studies composition requirement. Like many such second-part courses, this one is supposed to introduce students to academic research writing. I have designed my course around the topic of "Work, Labor, and Career," and in the first part of the course I include a section on class. Using various readings and materials that raise issues of class identity and social stratification, I ask students to work on papers that discuss a time when social class played a part in their lives.

As you know, class is a difficult topic for many students because of its subterranean existence in dominant media constructions of American society,

and most students struggle with the assignment. I have many students, though, who build off the personal stories of class injustice dramatized in a film like *Roger and Me* to begin to develop a real sense of class differences and personal class identity. When I first designed the course, my plan was to follow the classic model of starting with more "personal" assignments such as this one to lead into more "formal" kinds of academic research in the later papers. Although in the classroom I worked against drawing sharp distinctions between kinds of research and tried to instill the sense that including library-based research as part of developing a paper can be seen as a continuation of the issues students were exploring in earlier papers, inevitably most students saw the change to formal academic writing as a radical one. Gone was the emerging sense of voice, of point-of-view, of an exploration of values and beliefs. In their place was the attempt at the disembodied voice of the expert. In the case of students from class backgrounds where the relationship to so-called experts has often been antagonistic, the writing voice that emerged was often as much dismembered as disembodied.

Now, at such a juncture several options were open to me pedagogically, including pointing out that as working-class students they're going to have to learn to imitate the middle-class voice if they want to survive in college. I could then help them understand the characteristics of that discourse and help them learn to copy it. And in part, I have always included some component of demystifying the class bias of academic discourse as part of my pedagogical practice. But such an approach risks that essentialism I referred to earlier by

invoking terms like "working-class" and "middle-class" as if they were set in stone and I was myself the expert who could categorize any student with certainly if given enough information. More important, by teaching the imitation model I am doing nothing as an academic to change or even question those models of research and academic voice, even though I continue to struggle with them myself as a working-class academic.

I think as instructors we are confronted with the classic question of how to turn this split between the development of a working-class "I" and an academic "I" from a contradictory into a dialectic relationship. I don't have the answer to this question yet, but I do have some ideas about what the context for any such answers entails. Fundamentally, I think we need to reaffirm that the formation of a class conscious identity among working-class students in a predominantly middle-class academic culture will necessarily involve conflict.

•First, we need to recognize that constructing an academic "I" for working class college students means both mastering and challenging the various prevailing forms of the academic "I" and the academic paper itself, both within our own discipline and in their often contradictory manifestations across the disciplines. Such a challenge means not only engaging in the ways our students write academic essays, but in our own academic writing as well.

•Second, we also need to recognize that in talking about the construction of a working-class academic "I," I am talking about something that does not really exist, that perhaps can't exist, at least as the academy and academic discourses are presently constituted. How would I describe my own discourse

today, for example? Is this working-class academic discourse? An imitation of the impersonal academic tone? An attempt at a kind of professional informality, perhaps a discursive version of dress-down Fridays?

• Third, progressive poststructuralism can help us with these seemingly insoluble problems by reminding us that the development of class identity and consciousness is relational, not essential, in that the construction of any one class identity is dependent upon the construction of all other class identities within the social system. The older, Romantic ideal of the writer's "I" was often grounded in metaphors of discovery and homecoming, of the finding of voice as the finding of a place apart, of identity as sanctuary. I don't want to suggest that the coming to class consciousness does not bring with it powerful psychological benefits in terms of overcoming a sense of isolation and helplessness, but the construction of a working-class centered "I" in and of itself does not change the institutionalized class structure of higher education. Instead, the construction of class consciousness is a step in the process of class-based struggle and conflict, since the creation of a working-class academic "I" will necessarily involve systemic institutional change, not just personal discovery or adaptation.

• Fourth, engaging in a critique of the academic "I" and in the formation of a working-class academic "I" will mean encountering resistance, and it may ultimately be no more possible to come up with conflict-free ways for working-class students to get along in the academy than it is for working-class academics to construct a conflict-free professional life. I may tell my students it's okay to use "I" in the papers in my class while warning them to be careful in

other classes, but such advice doesn't really "solve" the problem. Instead, it may be more useful to work on an understanding of how in the academy profound ideological conflicts over class identity and status are often played out and therefore camouflaged in what seem to be the most trivial of writing issues, from the use of "I" to the use of semicolons, from margin spacing to citation form. Is explaining MLA style, for example, the same thing as justifying it, and if so, how carefully have I as an instructor investigated the class implications of such a justification, both for my students and for myself as an academic writer?

•Finally, the construction of a working-class academic "I," for students as well as teachers, means not the discovery or even invention of a stable, permanent identity offering sanctuary and respite. Instead, as with questions of gender, ethnicity, and race, the working-class academic "I" might more usefully be understood as a site for making sense of and responding to conflict, for problematizing in the classic Freierean sense. Constructing a working-class academic "I" is not a process of adapting to a given academic environment but of challenging that environment, a challenge inherent in the contradictions implied by the title "working-class academic." It's a challenge that has profound implications for the construction of pedagogy, for the understanding of rhetorical situations, and for the purposes of academic writing in general, whether by students or teachers. In the end, the constructing of the working-class academic "I" is more than just an issue of personal identity or of finding one's true voice for both students and instructors: it represents a challenge to very structures and culture of academic life itself.